

In God's house

by [Ronald Goetz](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

*Heaven in Stone and Glass: Experiencing the Spirituality of the Great Cathedrals* by Robert Barron

*The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* by Margaret Visser

Despite its nonverbal, abstract character, church architecture enshrines the theological perspectives of its builders--at least for those who have eyes to read it ("read" being a term both Robert Barron and Margaret Visser use to describe their analysis of buildings). As Visser says, "Churches are laid out with a certain trajectory in mind."

Reading churches is a useful undertaking, but it is fraught with systemic difficulties. The line between a sensitive reading of what is truly there and the projection of one's own perspective is often difficult to discern. In discovering and hewing to the objective side of that line, Visser is more successful than Barron. Both are Roman Catholics engaged in reading Catholic churches. Barron surveys a number of French Gothic churches and includes a number of illustrations. Though Visser's book is considerably longer and exhaustively researched, she focuses almost exclusively on a single church, Rome's beautiful seventh-century Saint Agnese fuori le Mura (Saint Agnes outside the walls), and she includes no illustrations.

Barron's reading of the Gothic seems suspiciously expressive of his own self-consciously up-to-date Thomistic theology. It is not surprising that a Thomist would love the Gothic, since it is a critical commonplace that Thomas Aquinas gave theological expression to the Gothic vision of Christianity. However, Barron's largely uncritical appropriation of Gothic architecture for the 21st century troubles me. He often ignores, minimizes or outright denies the darker elements of the medieval past. An example is his quite incredible reading of Anselm of Canterbury's doctrine of the atonement. He sees it not as a "theology of satisfaction" but as an acknowledgment that "God had to get dirty." This is certainly a view of God worth discussing, but to attribute it to Anselm is simply absurd.

Barron finds in Gothic an expression of the Roman Catholic approach to culture, which he speaks of as "the generous willingness to draw into its fullness all that is true and good in the religions and philosophies that it encountered." However, to celebrate Gothic openness requires a certain measure of circumspection. The "generous" cultural appropriation that Gothic churches celebrate was, after all, achieved through the theocratic dominance of the medieval church. As Aquinas himself acknowledged, the church must be willing to inflict religious persecution in order, as Barron would have it, "to draw into its fullness all that is true and good in the religions and philosophies that it encountered." To ignore this would be like celebrating the theocratic unity of Calvin's Geneva and failing to mention the burning of Servetus. It is good to express regret for the persecution of the Jews, but shouldn't we also ask if persecution isn't the inevitable outcome of any "Christian" theocracy, including the theocratic unity celebrated in the Gothic?

Barron reads the upward thrust of Gothic cathedrals as emblematic of a sense of "the otherness and incomprehensibility of God." As I have stood in these churches, catapulted up to the vault by their radical upward verticality, I have read them as emblematic not of humility, but of the attempt to storm heaven. They seem to me to express the effort of Christians who believe they have the mystical capacity to ascend to God and the rational capacity to prove God's existence.

Visser is an anthropologist rather than a trained theologian. As such, she is a first-rate collector and reporter of the history and legends that make up the folklore of St. Agnes. She believes that being a Christian does not disqualify her from doing objective anthropology; indeed, she thinks that viewing the phenomenon being studied from the "inside" may be especially productive. She is well aware of the critical debates swirling around every aspect of the history she recounts. She understands that what we can know about Agnes, a 12-year-old who died a martyr's death 1,700 years ago, is shrouded in legend. But Visser seems to hold that if the essential core of a legend is historical, faith should not be paralyzed by our uncertainty about where fact gives out and fancy takes over.

Visser knows the value of a measure of skepticism in keeping piety from going off the deep end. Consider her discussion of relics. She acknowledges that many Christians find the veneration of bones to be problematic, even repellent. She knows that relics have often occasioned rampant abuses, from superstition to outright fraud, and admits that the Catholic Church has often been guilty of perpetuating such abuses. Nevertheless, she believes that relics, while not essential to the faith,

can "resonate . . . with the apprehension of greatness in smallness: the little gray thing and the glory it points to; the symbol of death itself and its direct contact with eternal life." To the objection that the pedigree of many relics is in doubt, so that the bone being venerated might have come from a chicken rather than from a saint, Visser might reply that there are enough legitimate relics to validate the symbolic power of the false ones.

I like Visser's book not only because it is so informative about Catholic history and tradition but because of her nonpositivistic approach to that history. She can live with the uncertainty inherent in trying to sort out the past. She models a faith that is enlightened but not intimidated by critical analysis. I do not know how a reader who has never visited St. Agnes will respond to the book's lack of illustrations. I have visited the church twice--some years ago and recently, just after reading Visser. I found it very helpful to be able to concretely visualize what she describes.